

Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 282

Elijah – A Man of Like Passions

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 18th January, 2009**

Text: *"Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed..." (James 5. 17).*

If it had not been for this verse, the Holy Ghost's comment, we should have thought that Elijah was *not* a man like we are, *not* a man of like passions as we are – because as you read through the life of Elijah he seems an amazing person, a person different from almost everyone else in the Old Testament; and of course, in many ways he was. He suddenly appeared as if from nowhere. He went from this earth without dying; he ascended into heaven in a chariot of fire. He prayed on one occasion and brought down fire from heaven and destroyed his enemies. He prayed on another occasion and he raised the dead to life. You read the life of Elijah and it seems this great man, this eminent man, was not like we are. But the Holy Ghost says that he was. He was a man of like passions as we are. He felt his weakness. He was tried. He was tempted. He was plagued with unbelief. He "wrestled hard, as we do now, with sins, and doubts, and fears."

"Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed." Of course, there is much in this verse that we cannot emulate. We are told here that Elijah "prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months." That was one of the most terrible prayers in the whole of Scripture. He prayed that there might be a drought, that there might be a famine. He prayed that God's judgments might fall on Israel. He prayed there might be these dreadful desolations in the land. Now I do not see that we are called to follow Elijah in that. It must have been a special leading of the Spirit of God. It was a terrible prayer, and the interesting thing is that we do not have a hint of this prayer, we do not have a mention of it in the Old Testament. We have Elijah appearing and announcing this dreadful drought, the withholding of rain, but we do not read anything of this: that before he had wrestled earnestly in prayer that there might be no rain upon the earth. He was consumed with a desire for the honour and glory of God. He could say with his Lord and Master, "The zeal of Thine house hath eaten Me up." He put the honour and glory of God before his own personal comfort and that of his friends and that of his country. "He

prayed earnestly that it might not rain.” This is one of a few New Testament scriptures which clearly speak of things happening in the Old Testament, yet in the Old Testament itself we are not given a single hint concerning them.

“Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are.” So we see him going to the Brook Cherith – and he was a man of like passions as we are. It was not an easy way. We know the end; he did not. We see how he was brought through. It must have been a very lonely life, living there in the open air by a brook – and he was a man of like passions as we are. There is a word there for you lonely ones, a word there for you disappointed ones, a word there for those of you who cannot understand the way the Lord is leading you. He was sent to the Brook Cherith, and he was a man of like passions as we are with his hopes and his fears. “And he prayed.” I have often wondered about all those silent months when he was all alone by the Brook Cherith day and night. He was not preaching, he was not teaching, he was not meeting anyone. We wonder what he was doing. The Lord tells us here: “He prayed.” Sometimes in your life you will be led by the Lord and taken away and perhaps you wonder, How am I to spend this time? We have an example here: “He prayed.”

I often think of our dear old people in Bethesda. If you will, some of them have had very hard lives, busy lives, energetic lives, and now there is all this time to be spent. And do not forget, Elijah was a man of like passions as we are. It may be there is to be that ministry of prayer, that ministry of intercession. I know with one or two in a very particular and blessed way it has been so and they have been able to point to the answers to their prayers, and they have been able to see one and another and say, I prayed for that. And when they have been awake in the night and early in the morning, they have been praying.

Well, “Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are,” and he had that lonely life, “and he prayed,” and he received answers to his prayers. I have often thought about that point: the ministry of intercession. Some of the saints of God have been eminent in it, almost as if they could ask the Lord for anything and they got it. It is a ministry I have coveted for years. I have to say with Paul, “Not as though I had already attained.” O to be blessed with this spirit of intercession – this person, this difficulty, this cause laid on our mind, and in secret prayer to wrestle and then to look

and to watch and to wait and to see the Lord answering as “His providence unfolds the book.”

“Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed.” He prayed by the Brook Cherith. He prayed that his needs might be supplied, and how blessedly his needs were supplied! And as you are enabled to pray for your needs to be supplied, they will be, blessedly so, because the promise stands: “My God shall supply all your need” – *all of it*, body and soul, providence and grace – “according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus.” Now he prayed that his needs would be supplied, but they were supplied in a strange way, weren’t they? Ravens –

“More likely to rob than to feed,
Were ravens, which live upon prey;
But when the Lord’s people have need,
His goodness will find out a way.”

Now do you believe it? The Lord will supply your need – “Jehovah Jireh” – but you will have to pray for it. At times the Lord will lead you in a place you have never gone before. “Ye have not passed this way heretofore.” You are by the Brook Cherith and the Lord has led you there to pray.

There are two things in prayer. One is, it will draw you closer to the Lord, and the other is, it will bring you in dependence on the Lord. All these trials and afflictions – beloved friends, affliction does not bring the blessing; you know that, don’t you? Afflictions do not bring blessings, but they often “drive us home, to anchor on His grace.” That is what happened with Elijah. “I have commanded the ravens to feed thee there.” Over the years, and reading it this morning, I have felt that emphasis: *there*. It is in the pathway appointed. It is where the Lord leads you. It is when you come to that trial. It is at the Brook Cherith. “I have commanded the ravens to feed thee *there*”; and a few verses later: “I have commanded a widow woman *there* to sustain thee.” But the mystery of God’s dealings!

“Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed.” He must have prayed a lot when he saw the Brook Cherith from which he drank drying up day by day, and a silent God, and he did not know what to do. It seemed he was going to perish in the drought, and the Lord did not speak to him and tell him what to do until the very day when the brook was dried up. Now you and I would like the Lord to show us

what to do before we come there, and often the Lord waits until “all created streams are dried,” and then “His providence unfolds the book.”

“Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are.” It must have been a sore trial and it must have been hard to his flesh as he was waiting and not knowing what he had to do. And perhaps some of you are waiting this morning, seeking the Lord what you have to do. Then when the Lord spoke it was a strange word. He had to go down to Zarephath. Well, that was enemy land. It was heathen land. It was where Jezebel came from. He had to leave the promised land of peace and go to a heathen country. “I have commanded a widow woman *there* to sustain thee.”

“Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are.” It must have been a terrible trial to him. He must have been bewildered by it. Do you find things in your life sometimes that bewilder you, especially if you think you are following the Lord’s will? But you see the obedience of faith, and he went, and you see how “His providence unfolds the book, and makes His counsels shine.” There was not just a widow woman there. There was the barrel with a little meal in it; there was a cruse with a little oil in it; and there was more than that: there was a gracious, almighty God. Jehovah Jireh, the Lord will provide.

“Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are.” I am sure he would have liked to have had that barrel overflowing at the top, but he did not. There was a bit at the bottom; no provision for tomorrow until tomorrow comes.

“No stock on nature’s barren ground;
My all is in Thy storehouse found.

Wouldn’t we like to have a stock of grace and strength and wisdom and everything else for tomorrow, and next week, and this coming year? Dear child of God, you will not have it. “As thy days, so shall thy strength be.” When you come *there* you will find there is a handful of meal at the bottom of your barrel and you will find there is a little oil still in your cruse. You see the mysterious working of God.

“Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed.” And what a wonderful prayer it was on Mount Carmel, and what a wonderful prayer it was when he prayed the fire down from heaven, and what a wonderful prayer it was when he prayed for the little boy to be raised to life. “See, thy son liveth.” And he was a man of like passions as

we are. I saw this years ago. People talk about the power of prayer. There is not any power in prayer, though we know what we mean and we do not make people offenders for a word. The power is in Almighty God dealing with our weakness. The power was not in Elijah; the power was not in his prayers; the power was in Elijah's God.

But did you notice even in that wonderful prayer on Mount Carmel when the fire descended from heaven, destroyed the sacrifice, when the rain came after those years of drought, he had to wait for it? He was a man of like passions as we are, and he prayed, but he was tempted in his prayer, and he did not get the answer immediately. He had to wait for it. He was sure his prayer was going to be answered, and he sent the little servant boy, but the little servant boy came back with this answer: "There is nothing." You know that, don't you, some of you? You have had your head between your knees like Elijah did, wrestling with the Lord in prayer, and you send to look for an answer, and there is nothing. "Go again seven times."

"Without cessation pray;
Your prayers will not prove vain;
Our Joseph turns aside to weep,
But cannot long refrain."

He prayed, and he received the answer.

"Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed." But there is another prayer of Elijah recorded – when he was under the juniper tree. We think of that wonderful prayer on Mount Carmel and the wonderful prayer raising the dead to life and the wonderful prayer bringing fire from heaven. But that prayer under the juniper tree was not much of a prayer. "O Lord, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers." There was not much prayer in it and it did not make sense, but it received a blessed answer. So try what your poor prayers will do.

"Without cessation pray;
Your prayers will not prove vain."

Elijah, a man of like passions as we are, how he defied Ahab and the priests of Baal and Jezebel, but he had to prove that the best of men are only men at best, and left to himself he faltered and failed and fled; one day defying the hosts of Israel and the hosts of hell, and the next day fleeing from a woman, running away from his troubles. The Lord will

never let you fly away from your troubles. David proved that. “Oh that I had wings like a dove! for then would I fly away, and be at rest.” “This is my infirmity.” The Lord will not give you the wings of a dove to fly away from your troubles; He will give you the wings of an eagle to bear you above and carry you through.

You know what David said at the end: “Cast thy burden upon the Lord, and He shall sustain thee.” Notice that. The Lord does not promise always to take the burden away – some have to carry a burden down to their dying day – but the Lord has promised sustaining, supporting, upholding grace. “Cast thy burden upon the Lord, and He shall sustain thee.”

But poor Elijah. If ever he appears a man of like passions as we are, it is when he fled and he lay down under the juniper tree and he thought he was a complete failure. He thought it was the end. He thought there was nothing. He thought he could not go on any further. All he could say was, “O Lord, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers.” There was not much prayer in that prayer, but the Lord most graciously answered it. Perhaps he had more dramatic answers, but he never had a more loving answer than when he lay prostrate, helpless under the juniper tree. An angel was sent from heaven to comfort the Lord’s poor, failing, trembling servant, “afflicted, tossed with tempest, and not comforted.” He caused him to sleep. There was a cake baked on the coals. The old Puritan divines said that the Lord sometimes turns angels into bakers! An angel sent from heaven to bake him a cake – that was natural; that was providential; that was bodily. The Lord realises the bodily needs of His people as well as their spiritual needs. But then He fed him with the heavenly manna, the food from heaven. “Arise and eat; because the journey is too great for thee.” Now that is exactly what Elijah was feeling, and Almighty God did not contradict him. Perhaps that is what some of you are feeling this morning: the journey is too great for me. And Almighty God does not contradict you. He provides for you, He strengthens you, He leads you. “Arise and eat; because the journey is too great for thee.”

“Then let the worldling boast his joys,
We’ve meat to eat he knows not of;
We count his treasures worthless toys,
While we possess a Saviour’s love.”

“And the Lord said unto him, Go, return.” The Lord had not finished with him yet. There was still something for him to do. His days on earth had not ended. Have you ever thought of it? Poor Elijah in his extremity cried under that juniper tree, Let me die and not live. *He never did die.* He was carried up triumphantly in a chariot of fire into heaven!

“Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed.” The way this has specially rested with me this week is like this: concerning our prayers, our poor prayers, our difficulties in prayer, our problems in prayer, and Elijah is brought before us as a man who was much blessed in prayer. We are told this, and it is such an encouraging word – at least it is for me – that “Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed.” He had the same problems in prayer that you and I do, but he prayed, and he received answers to his prayers. He knew what it was to have wandering thoughts. He knew what it was to have a prayerless spirit. He knew what it was to have a hard heart. He knew what it was to pray and feel there was no prayer in his prayer. He knew what it was to feel that if God is going to accomplish His purposes, and surely He will, then why bother to pray? He was “a man subject to like passions as we are.” He had the same problems, the same difficulties, the same unbelief, the same sinful heart that you and I have, but he prayed despite all this and with all this and through all this, and the Lord answered his prayers. The Lord blessedly answered his prayers. So there is the encouragement for you to pray, though you have all these problems. Even the great Elijah had these difficulties and problems.

Mr. Oliver Pack used to say that by nature we have a sinful aversion to prayer. There is the mercyseat sprinkled with blood. There is the throne of grace. There is the promise, to “obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need,” the wonderful privilege, the loving welcome, the King of kings, and yet our sinful hearts are so backward in prayer. Elijah knew all this, but he prayed, and there is that encouragement to you and me to pray on.

The vital point of all this morning is this: that prayer is answered for Jesus’ sake, through the Mediator. It is not whether our prayers are good prayers or bad prayers. There is so much mixed with them, but it is for Jesus’ sake. It is through the merit of Jesus’ precious blood. It is through His great and glorious work as High Priest, merciful and faithful. It is through Him, the blessed Mediator who “stands between, in garments

dyed in blood.” I love to quote Thomas Watson, the godly Puritan. He said you would not recognise your prayers if you could see them entering heaven. He said it is like the little girl whose father is sick and she goes out to bring him some flowers in an old jam jar, and there are more weeds than flowers. Her mother takes them out of the old jam jar and puts them in a beautiful vase. She takes all the weeds out and adds a few more flowers from the garden and beautifully arranges them, and then she takes them in and presents them to her husband. Thomas Watson said that is like your prayers. The Lord takes out of them all that is sinful and adds to them everything that is missing, and then He presents them acceptably to His Father. Have you ever wondered why such poor prayers receive such blessed answers for Jesus’ sake? That is the vital thing this morning. These other things are interesting and important; but this is the vital thing, the ground and foundation of prayer, the ground of access, the ground of acceptance, the ground of answers for Jesus’ sake.

“Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed,” and he received the answers. There is one verse of a hymn which is extremely blessed on this point, and I hope it will be made a blessing to some of you this morning as you think before you pray of the poverty of your prayers and worse than that, the sinfulness of your person. It comes in the well-known hymn, “How sweet the name of Jesus sounds!” People often say to me, Why did Gadsby only put three verses in? and I do not know the answer, but I wonder why the modern hymnbooks when they put more in only put six in. This is the verse that every hymnbook leaves out:

“By Him” – Christ –
“By Him my prayers acceptance gain,
Although with sin defiled;
Satan accuses me in vain,
And I am owned a child.”

Now that is the ground, the only ground on which our poor prayers are answered and our sinful persons accepted, through the Lord Jesus, His name, His Person, His death, His precious blood, His resurrection, His intercession, His all-prevailing advocacy on high. It is worth repeating:

“By Him my prayers acceptance gain,
Although with sin defiled;
Satan accuses me in vain,
And I am owned a child.”

“Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed,” and he received the answers. May it be an encouragement to you and me with our faults and failures and sins and hardness and unbelief still to pray, still to press our case, and to look for the answers on mercy’s ground, and mercy’s ground alone.

“Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed,” and the Lord answered his prayers.